

MODULE 1

INTRODUCTION

Ostriches, emus, and rheas are large flightless birds that belong to the group of birds called ratites. The name "ratite", was derived from the Latin word "ratis", meaning "raft", which describes the shape of the sternum. The sternum of ratites has no keel, is convex to the outside, concave to the inside, and thus has a somewhat "raft-like" shape.

Although similar in many ways, ratite physical appearance is divergent. Ostriches, native to Africa, stand eight to nine feet tall and weigh over three hundred pounds. Emus are native to Australia, stand five to six feet tall, and weigh more than one hundred and twenty pounds. The smallest of the three is the rhea. Native to South America, rheas stand up to five feet tall and weigh over eighty pounds.

Ratites have long life-spans. Ostriches, for example, can live to seventy years of age, and the hens can produce eggs for as long as forty years. All ratites have very acute hearing and keen eyesight. Their peripheral vision is almost three hundred and sixty degrees.

Surprisingly, ratites are excellent swimmers. Although unable to fly, they are extremely agile. Ostriches are capable running at speeds approaching fifty miles an hour. The same strong thigh muscles that allow ratites to run fast enable them to kick with tremendous force. Add sharp toenails to this strength and the potential danger of handling these birds becomes evident, especially if they are frightened or agitated.

Commercially, ostriches, emus, and rheas are valued for their meat, hides, and to some extent, feathers. Emus are especially valued for their oil.

As commercial ratite production increased over the years, so did the demand for inspection at slaughter. Ratite slaughter came under the USDA voluntary poultry inspection program in 1995. Guidelines call for both antemortem and postmortem examinations.

Ratites are susceptible to all the common diseases of poultry to varying degrees. Unique among birds, they are also susceptible to anthrax.

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Ratites
(General Information)

Species	Adult Weight (lbs)	Adult Height (ft)	Color (body and wing feathers)	Number of Toes	Slaughter Age (months)	Slaughter Weight (lbs)	Gut Length to Body Length
Ostrich Red ¹ Blue ² Black ³	400 - 450 ¹ 350 - 400 ² 250 - 300 ³	8 - 9 ¹ 7.5 - 8 ² 6 - 6.5 ³	Males - blk, gry, & wht Females - gry & wht	2	12 - 16 Avg. 14	240 ¹ 240 ² <240 ³	13:1
Emu	90 - 120 Extremely heavy - 150	5 - 6	Grayish brown to black	3	12 - 16 Avg. 14	90 - 100	4:1
Rhea	70 - 80	5 - 6	Gray or white	3	12 - 16 Avg. 14	60	8:1

Three subspecies of ostrich are grown commercially in the United States. The neck feathers of each subspecies are colored either red, blue, or black. Those characteristics that are unique to each subspecies are identified in the chart above by the superscripts 1, 2, or 3.

All of the above weights, ages, and other measurements are approximations and may vary from bird to bird.